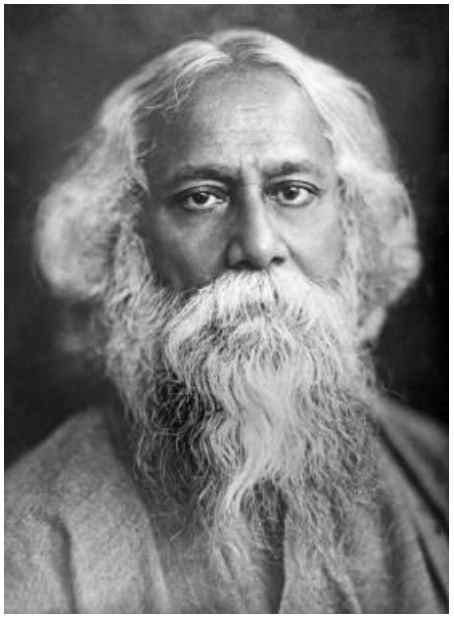
A Woman's Letter

Rabindranath Tagore



Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore was one of India's greatest short story writers. He also holds a special place in the world of poetry, painting, and music. Adopting a very simple style of writing, he wrote about various sections of society, such as farmers and landlords. Social evils like casteism, corruption, and poverty remained an integral part of his works. Rabindranath Tagore was born in 1861 in a wealthy landlord family of West Bengal. He died in 1941. During his long writing career, he wrote more than 90 short stories. "Stri Ka Patra" is one of those stories.

KATHA

Respected Sir,

It's been fifteen years since our marriage. We've been together ever since. I haven't had a chance to write a letter until now. Now your middle daughter-in-law in in Jagannathpuri for a pilgrimage.

When I came, I realized that I have another relationship with the world and God. That's why today, I've dared to write this letter. Don't mistake this for a letter from your middle daughter-in-law.

I remember the day you all came to see me. I was 12 years old. Our home was in a remote village. It was so difficult for you all to get there. My family worked very hard to provide you good hospitality.

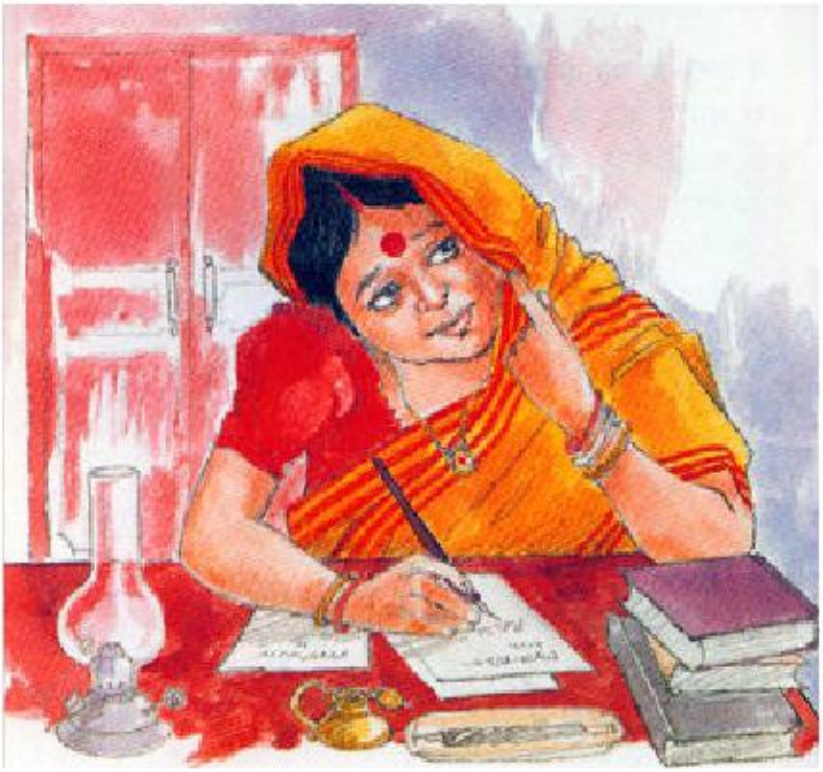
The mournful tune of farewell echoed.
I came to your house as the middle
daughter-in-law. All the women examined
the new bride. Everyone agreed -
the new daughter-in-law is beautiful.

You quickly forgot that I was beautiful. But you couldn't forget that I was intelligent, even if you wished to. My mother used to say that a sharp mind is a woman’s blessing .

But what could I do?

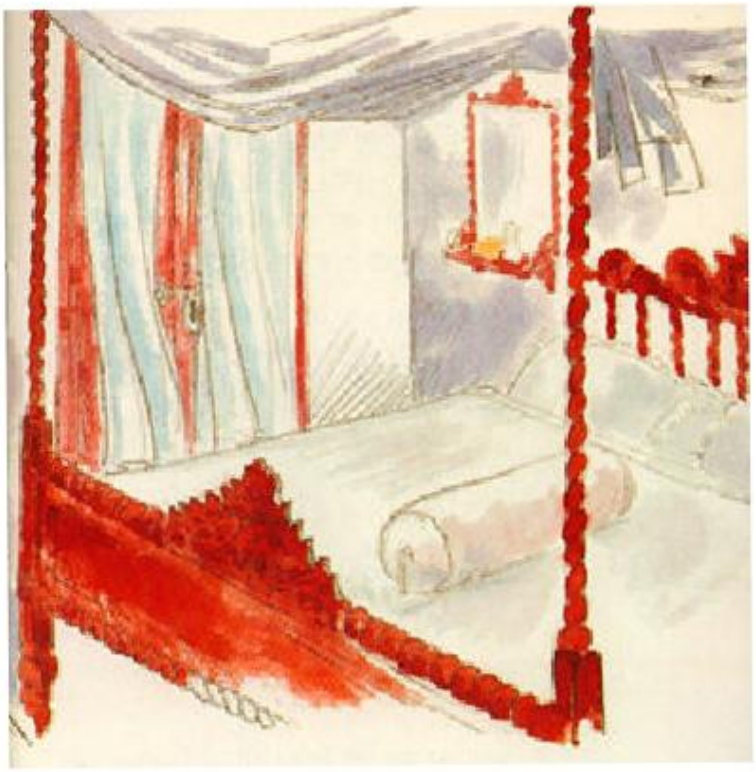
You all said, "This daughter-in-law is very smart."

People said bad things about me, but I forgave them.



I used to secretly write poetry.

The poems were quite ordinary, but at least it was my own voice. They were free from the constraints of your customs.



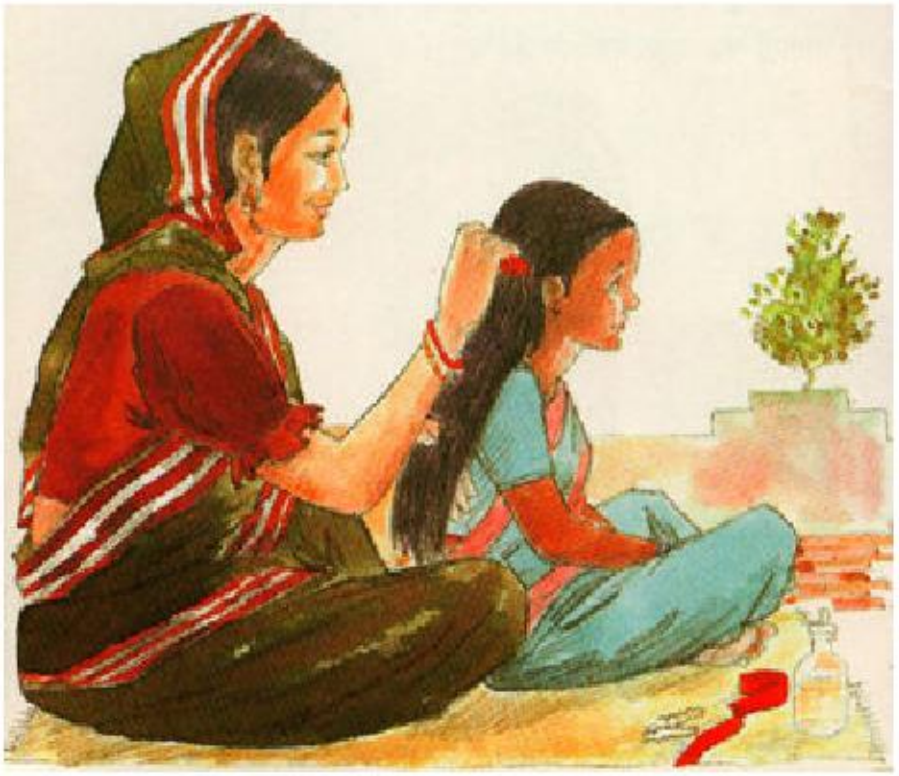
Then death came close and snatched away my little daughter. I was left behind to endured the pain of becoming a mother. But I never experienced the joy of being called one.

I overcame this tragedy too. I got back to my daily chores, tending to the cows and buffaloes, feeding them. The atmosphere in your house was dull and suffocating. Those cows and buffaloes felt like my own. Perhaps life would have passed this way.

I would not be writing this letter but for an incident. All of a sudden, a strange event, planted a seed of hope. As the seed took root and grew, the household began to loosen its grip on me. My sister-in-law's younger sister, Bindu, moved into our home.

I saw all of you were very worried. My sister-in-law’s sister was neither beautiful nor wealthy. This problem deeply troubled my sister-in-law. On the one hand, she loved her sister, but on the other, she had to bear her in-laws' displeasure.

I couldn't bear the rude treatment given to that orphan girl. I offered Bindu a place next to me. My sister-in-law breathed a sigh of relief. But later the burden of this mistake fell on me.



At first, Bindu was hesitant to receive my affection. But gradually, she began to love me deeply. Bindu poured a vast ocean of her love upon me. I never imagined anyone could give me so much love and respect.

You couldn't stand the love and affection I gave Bindu. I remember the day a bracelet went missing. You didn't hesitate for a minute to accuse Bindu of theft.

As soon as a small red rash appeared on Bindu's body, you immediately declared it as smallpox. There was no proof in any accusation. For proof, it was enough for her to be “Bindu".

As Bindu grew and blossomed, your anger intensified. When all attempts to throw the girl out of the house failed, you arranged her marriage.

The men said that the marriage would take place at the boy’s home. That was their custom.

Hearing this, my heart trembled. Until the wedding day, Bindu held her sister's feet and cried, "Sister, don't throw me out like this. I will stay in your cowshed. I will do whatever you say..."

The helpless girl said to me sobbingly, "Sister, I feel really alone?"

I said, "No, Bindu. Whatever your condition, I will always be with you." Sister-in-law had tears in her eyes. Holding them back, she told Bindu, “Always remember one thing - husband is the wife's God."

It had been three days since Bindu's wedding. In the morning, I went to the cowshed to check on the cows and buffaloes and found Bindu lying in a corner. Seeing me, she burst into tears.

Bindu claimed her husband was insane. She somehow escaped from the clutches of her ruthless mother-in-law and her insane husband.

My whole body burned with anger and hatred. I blurted out, "Is this deception called marriage? You'll stay with me. Let's see who takes you away."

You all got very angry with me. You all started saying, "Bindu is lying." Shortly after, Bindu's in-laws came to take her back.

To save me humiliation, Bindu herself stood in the front. They took Bindu away. My heart cried out in pain.

I couldn't stop Bindu. I realized that even if Bindu died, she would never return to our shelter again.

Then I heard that my elder aunt was going on a pilgrimage to Jagannathpuri. I said, "I'll go with her." You all were very happy to hear this.

I called my brother Sharat. I told him, "Brother, I'll be going to Puri next Wednesday. Somehow, put Bindu on the same train, too."

Sharat returned that evening. Seeing his pale face, I felt a pang of dread creeping down my spine. I asked, "Couldn't you convince her?"

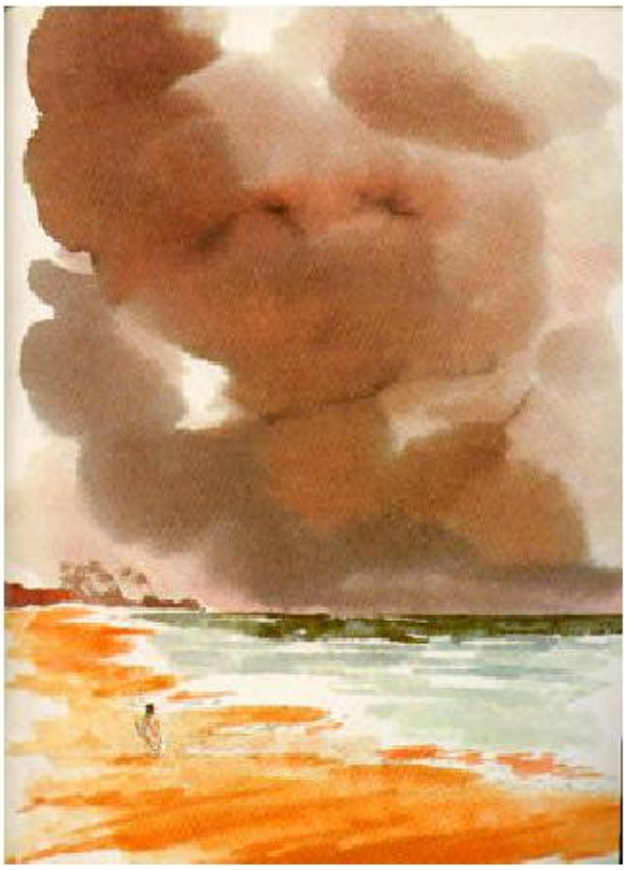
"There was no need. Yesterday, Bindu committed suicide by setting herself on fire," Sharat replied. I was stunned.

I've come to Jagannathpuri on a pilgrimage. Bindu needn’t have come all the way here. But it was necessary for me.

What people call sorrow and suffering was not present in my life. There was never a shortage of food in your home. Whatever your elder brother's character may have been, there was no flaw in yours. I have no complaints.

But I won't return to your house. I saw Bindu. Now I've learnt what it is for a woman to be wrapped up in domestic plight. I don't need your family anymore. I've crossed your threshold. Right now, I stand before the endless blue ocean.

You people had imprisoned me behind the veil of customs. From nowhere, Bindu peeked behind this veil and saw me. And Bindu's death tore down that veil, setting me free. The middle daughter-in-law is now gone for good.



Do you think I'm going to die like Bindu? Don't be afraid. I won't play that old joke on you.

Mirabai was a woman just like me. Her shackles were no less. She didn't have to commit suicide to free herself from them. I have faith in myself. I can live. I will live.

Free from your shelter

Mrinal